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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5421
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1247
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0024
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 4393
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1872
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3616
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 7122
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE 0562
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4732
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 0978
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 0982

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 001686

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, OES/ENV/ETC; BANGKOK FOR REO

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [SENV](#) [ECON](#) [PGOV](#) [BM](#)
SUBJECT: CI TO PROTECT BURMESE TURTLES

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Despite Burma's unpredictable environment for NGO activities, Conservation International (CI) recently received provisional GOB approval for two major projects to address threats to a number of animal species in Burma, including the critically endangered Burmese Star Tortoise and Arakan Forest turtle. Before signing formal MOUs, GOB officials asked CI to conduct three limited projects: a training course on tortoises and turtles, a rapid assessment of species endemic to Indawgyi Lake area of Kachin state, and an assessment of turtle breeding areas in Chindwin River tributaries. CI plans to begin its work in Burma in 2007. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On November 7, Conservation International's (CI) Director for Indo-Burma, Jake Brunner, updated Econoff on two proposed projects funded by grants from Blue Moon Fund and KNCF, a corporate Japanese Fund. CI plans to collaborate with Burmese universities on the conservation of endemic turtles and tortoises, and pilot conservation incentive agreements with Chin hunters living near the Rakhine Yoma Elephant Sanctuary (RYES). CI received a license from Treasury/OFAC for this work in January 2006.

¶3. (SBU) Despite an environment where NGOs face increasingly tight controls and scrutiny, Brunner and Burma project coordinator Myint Aung expressed optimism that CI would gain all necessary approvals. Brunner said that all levels of ministry officials had reviewed the proposals, and had sent them on to the highest levels for final approval. Myint Aung said that the Forestry Minister has already committed to supporting the project and is writing a recommendation to the Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank to allow CI to open an account that is exempt from the standard 10% tax on foreign exchange transactions. Brunner expects to sign Memoranda of Understanding with the Ministry of Forestry, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, and the Ministry of Education within the next few months.

¶4. (SBU) At a meeting on November 6, the Director General of Fisheries asked CI to implement three smaller projects before signing an MOU. Brunner agreed, and said CI now plans to bring in foreign experts to offer a training session on

tortoises and turtles for University of Mandalay students in January, and to conduct a rapid assessment of endemic species in the Indawgyi Lake area of Kachin State in March. The third project will investigate breeding grounds of an endangered turtle in tributaries of the Chindwin River, where the GOB plans to build a dam. The DG offered the support of his staff in all of these locations.

15. (SBU) Once CI completes these smaller projects and signs the MOUs, work on the two primary projects can begin. In the first project, CI staff will work with Mandalay University, Yadanabon Zoo, and Minsontaung Wildlife Sanctuary (MWS) in Mandalay Division to protect the world's largest wild population of critically endangered Burmese Star Tortoises. The project will support captive breeding facilities at the zoo and MWS; tortoise release and radio tracking; student-led research; and community outreach and education. According to Brunner, the Sanctuary warden was keen to cooperate, since he was demoted recently because his sanctuary lost 39 Star Tortoises to poachers over the past year.

16. (SBU) The second project will focus on ethnic Chin living in Rakhine State. Over the past 100 years, a number of Chin hunting groups have migrated south into Rakhine State to hunt gaur, a large wild buffalo-like mammal, using dogs and spears. They now pose a threat to the 175,000-hectare Rahkine Yoma Elephant Sanctuary, created in 1999 to protect one of Burma's largest wild elephant populations. Largely covered with bamboo, the Sanctuary is also home to the critically endangered Arakan Forest Turtle, as well as important populations of wild cats, otters, and bears.

17. (SBU) According to Brunner and Myint Aung, the Chin are interested in negotiating agreements that would link development support to no-hunting contracts. They are proud of their forest skills, Brunner reports, and could make excellent wildlife monitors. The Sanctuary has only ten staff

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and needs further logistical support. Brunner said CI project members will teach them community forestry, livestock farming and agriculture skills, and offer them positions as wildlife monitors in exchange for their commitment to cease hunting.

18. (SBU) Comment: CI has done its homework and possesses many of the attributes needed to run a successful NGO project in Burma: a detailed assessment of the current situation (CI's study took two years); identification of well-qualified and well-connected staff members; and full compliance with the Treasury/OFAC vetting process. They have also lined up the right support within the GOB to succeed, and the regime generally allows environmental organizations freer access than projects that have a potential political focus. If CI is able to proceed with its projects in 2007 as planned, its efforts would also serve as useful models for other groups in designing programs that help protect Burma's threatened environment while, at the same time, training and empowering local communities to better appreciate and protect their own natural resources. End comment.